

# Karoshi Anyone?

This article by Continuum EAP's Kevin J. Mattran was originally published in the Lincoln Human Resources Management Association (LHRMA) newsletter in June of 2006.

A friend of mine was telling me how busy he was at work. He went on and on about overtime, deadlines, bringing work home etc. As he rambled I interrupted with one word, "Karoshi."

The word caused some confusion. He asked if it was anything like sushi, told me he didn't like to sing in public, then he asked if it was a new sport sedan. None of his guesses were correct. I was using the word as a warning to him. Karoshi is a Japanese word that means "death by overwork."

The first official Karoshi death in Japan was in 1989. He was 48-year old man who typically worked 15-hour days. The man had logged at least 100 hours of overtime monthly for the past year. He worked three consecutive 15-hour days just before he died.

Japanese workers work 10% longer the average American employee, that's about 225 hours more per year. But, before we pity the Japanese, we have to look at ourselves. The average employee in the U.S. works more than 320 hours more than the average French or German worker; then, to add insult to injury, the French and German have substantially higher productivity rates than we do. Here are a few more astonishing facts:

- The U.S. is one of the only modern countries without a law mandating minimum vacation time.
- In 2004 more than 30% of Americans gave up earned vacation time totaling about 415 million unused vacation days.
- In 2004 the average US worker sacrificed 3 vacation days, compared to 2 days in 2003.
- One-third of U.S. workers surveyed said that they "check in" with the office while on vacation.



Japan attributes about 30,000 deaths per year to Karoshi. Could we be headed in the same direction? The Annals of Internal Medicine reports that 24% of U.S. workers suffered fatigue for periods longer than two weeks caused by job stress. Also, the United Nations' International Labor Organization says the 75% of American workers consider their jobs stressful.

The news isn't all bad. American employers are responding with more flexibility in the paid time off they offer to employees. In 2004, 63% of U.S. companies used some sort of flexible paid-leave bank compared to only 21% on 2000. Here are some other things you can do to help keep your employees healthy and productive:

Keep employees informed about the amount of paid leave they have accrued and encourage them to use it.

Keep paid time off request forms readily available; some employees won't ask for them.

Place less emphasis on company sponsored reward and recognition events and use rewards that encourage time with family and friends like sports and theatre tickets.

Use your company's wellness program to educate employees about the health benefits of maintaining a work/life balance.

Use your EAP as a resource to help your employees achieve and maintain a healthy work/life balance.

The future is bright for U.S. workers because with awareness comes change. The Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania, alma mater to world-famous work-a-holics Donald Trump and Warren Buffett, now offers a work/life integration course that teaches student how to juggle work, family and community and not sacrifice career goals.

*For help in achieving a healthy work/life balance, contact Continuum EAP at: (402) 476-0186 or (800) 755-7636*

*You may also contact an employee assistance professional at: [eespecialist@4continuum.com](mailto:eespecialist@4continuum.com)*

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